

Writing Workshop Notes

These notes are from the School of Biological Science Writing Workshop, 25 May 2016. The first half was run by [Gregory Howell](#) (Senior Lecturer in SBS, UoA) and the second half was run by [Helen Sword](#) (Director of CLEAR, UoA).

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First Part – Tips for Getting Writing Done

Additional books:

- Scientific Writing = Thinking in Words by David Lindsay
- How To Write A Lot by Paul Silvia

Key Tip: Schedule and Prioritise your writing. Avoid “binge writing”

Specious barriers to writing:

1) “I can't find the time”

Response: Find small or larger gaps in your schedule, mark some of them down as writing, and make sure only writing happens during that time.

2) I need large chunks of time for writing

Response: Not really - you need to form habits. Try writing during small chunks of time. Keep a notebook for writing down ideas and thoughts during your other activities.

3) I need to do more analyses/I have to read more papers before I can start writing

Response: There is ALWAYS something you can write now.

People who put off writing also tend to put off analysis and reading.

You will never have read everything.

Use your scheduled writing time to read/analyse if you have run out of things you can write.

Each time you read a paper, write about what you've read.

4) I need a better space to write in

Response: Go somewhere else to write!

5) I am waiting for inspiration/I only write well when I feel like writing

Response: Writing is part of your job, and for PhD/research masters your final grade is based almost 100% on your writing.

Science writing can be relatively formulaic so should not require inspiration.

Productivity Tips

1) Keep calm and edit later – for now just stick to writing down whatever comes into your head, without worrying about grammar, or reference checking, etc.

2) Set writing project goals:

- make a note of all the writing projects you wish to complete (“write thesis” is too broad, break it up into chapters etc.)

- prioritise them

- print out the list and pin it up next to your computer

You may change your priorities or your goals later on, but it is helpful to have an initial plan.

3) Daily goal setting (examples):

- word count, e.g. “write at least 200 words today”
- print previous day's draft, read it, revise it
- first three paragraphs of the next section
- brainstorm and outline for the chapter

Make your daily goals **concrete**. Write down the goal for your current session at the start of the session.

4) Monitor your writing – e.g. record your added word count each day and plot graphs of it, maybe per day or per week. See if you can spot patterns e.g. you work better in the morning than in the afternoon, or better at the start rather than the end of the week.

5) Reward yourself – e.g. at the end of the day or week

6) Attend or arrange a writing retreat

7) Form a writing group – e.g. “shut up and write” sessions or debriefing/discussion/critiquing sessions/mix of both

Doing these sorts of things help you get into the habit of writing. And it these habits that result in productivity.

Structure Tip: Reverse Outlining

Useful technique to see if your writing is clear/focused/flows well. It allows you to reflect on your writing. Write. Reflect. Repeat

- 1) Start with a completed chapter/article you have written.
- 2) Write down the main point of each paragraph and number it.
- 3) Transfer the list of points to a blank page and assess it.

Ask yourself:

Does every paragraph relate back to the main idea/hypothesis?

Where does the article not flow/make sense?

Do several paragraphs repeat the same idea?

Does one paragraph juggle several main points?

Are any paragraphs very long or short?

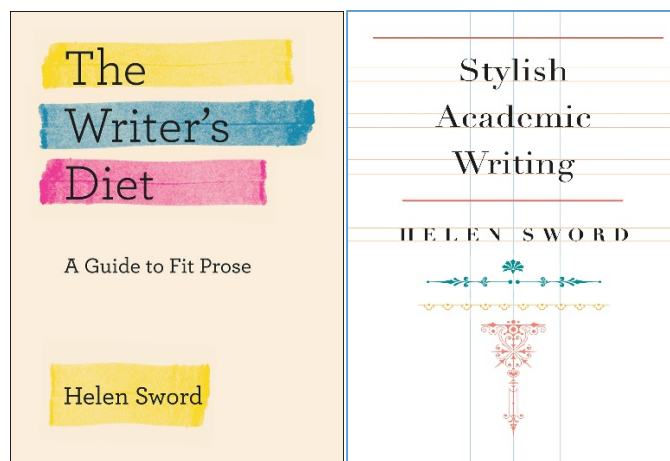
Note: the reverse outline in the second best time to write an outline – writing one at the beginning is highly recommended.

Other Tips

Get inspired by great writers: take note of writers whose work engages you and whose explanations you can follow easily. Think about how they express their ideas.

Second Part – Stylish Academic Writing

Helen Sword is the author of two books on academic writing: *The Writer’s Diet* and *Stylish Academic Writing*.



Summary article in the Conversation - <http://theconversation.com/seven-secrets-of-stylish-academic-writing-7025>

Is your writing flabby (test)? - http://writersdiet.com/?page_id=4

Beware of nominalizations (AKA zombie nouns) - <http://ed.ted.com/lessons/beware-of-nominalizations-aka-zombie-nouns-helen-sword>

Suggested elements of good writing

- Clear
- Concise / elegant (as in a proof)
- “Illuminates” topic
- Introducing concepts early on to avoid jargon
- Context then question then contribution – i.e. clearly structured
- Good signposting to indicate the structure (may be through the sentence structure rather than by using numbered headings)
- Conversational tone
- Narrative flow
- Not assuming knowledge

Side notes:

- The “Curse of Knowledge” (read esp. Steven Pinker's Sense of Style on this topic)
- Although most people dislike overuse of jargon/technical language, they often feel pressured to use it. We are acculturated to speak like the in-crowd in our discipline, but this blocks others from accessing our work.
- Good, well-used jargon can be a “linguistic macro” i.e. it uses one or two words to refer to a much more complex idea

Elements of Writing Style

Audience

Think of 5 specific people:

- 1) A famous figure in your discipline
- 2) A “critical friend” within your field (who will point out where you have gone wrong)
- 3) A “critical friend” outside your field
- 4) An advanced undergrad/early-stage grad student in your field
- 5) Other friend/family, possibly with non-academic background

You cannot write work to satisfy all of these people. But you should at least think about who might find your work accessible.

Be concerned if your critical friend within the field is happy with your writing but your critical

friend outside the field is put off by jargon or complex language etc.

Be more concerned if you can't communicate with the junior student within your field – this may indicate you are not suited to teaching.

Think about how you might express your research for a non-academic friend to understand.

The most difficult kind of writing is for funding applications. The audience in this case is often varied: some of the funding committee may be within your field, some may not.

Voice

Consider whether you are writing in the first person (I/we) or third person (usually passive voice). Also consider whether you are writing in a personal or impersonal way (i.e. does the writing seem to be more subjective and have a personality and opinions behind it?)

It can be good to introduce a work using a personal style, to draw the reader in and make them feel more engaged, before switching to impersonal style for the main description and analysis.

Story Elements

- voice (who is telling the story?)
- character
- action
- setting
- transformation (what changed?)
- back story
- plot (not just what happened, but why?)
- structure
- point of view

Think about your writing as if it were a fictional story. You might consider starting with an exciting point rather than writing chronologically.

You might want to consider the possible “characters” in your story. We rarely tell the story of the researchers instead of the research, but even the research may have “characters” within it e.g. for biologists the particular animals being studied etc.

(Helen ran a small activity to work on the idea of the “characters” of your research. You tried to write your research as a fairy tale. “Once upon a time...” Success varies but fun to think about.)

Grammar

When writing, try once or twice in each paragraph to write a sentence that has a simple noun and verb construction without too much additional structure. Try to write a sentence where the agent and action are clear because the agent is made explicit rather than implied. Particularly try to do this for the sentence making the main point!

In much scientific writing the nouns used are abstract and the agent (who did the action?) is implied, and is usually the scientists. For example: “Determining the underlying cause of ... requires...” has the scientists as the implied agents who are doing the determining.

The meaning of the sentence may be much clearer if you explicitly state the agent and action and they are mapping to the subject and verb.

It is harder to keep control of sentences with more verbs, as you can lose track of the agent.

Some concrete words are commonly used in abstract ways e.g. “explore”, whereas by contrast “discuss” is a more purely abstract verb.

For good writers, the more abstract the subject matter, the **harder** they work to link the ideas back to the real world, e.g. by using examples or analogies or by their use of language.

If there are more than 12 words between your subject and verb it better be for a reeeeeeally good reason.

Exercise:

1) Choose a sentence from your writing (preferably not a short one)

2) Count the words

3) Circle the verbs

- were there too many forms of the verb “to be” e.g. is/was/will be?

- were there any unusual/vivid words?

- were there any actions you can visualize?

4) Box the nouns

- unique/unexpected nouns

- abstract vs. concrete

- nominalizations a.k.a. “zombie nouns”



Figure 1: Zombie Nouns TED-Ed video

For more juicy writing tips watch the [Stats Department Writing Panel](#) (2015).